

VZCZCXRO5874
RR RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHVL #0946/01 2861502
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 131502Z OCT 06 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY VILNIUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0677
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VILNIUS 000946

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/11/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [LH](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: LITHUANIA OUTLINES BELARUS POLICY, ASSISTANCE
PRIORITIES

REF: A. VILNIUS 540 B. VILNIUS 705 C. VILNIUS 191 D.

VILNIUS 191

VILNIUS 00000946 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Pol/Econ Cheif Rebecca Dunham for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
)

[11.](#) (C) Summary. Lithuanian activism in support of reform in Belarus continues. In EU structures, Lithuania argues for an exception for Belarus to the anticipated 60-euro Schengen visa fee, encourages smarter spending of Commission money to support democratic forces in Belarus, and will possibly seek to re-visit the no-cabinet level meeting rule. While Lithuania supports broadening the travel ban on Belarusian officials, it will continue to oppose generalized sanctions -- such as repealing GSP privileges -- that might appear to hurt the Belarusian people. Lithuania continues its own modest assistance to Belarusian activist groups, and is still trying to create its proposed public-private European Fund for Democracy which could direct funds (presumably from the EU and elsewhere) to support civil society in Eastern Europe.
End Summary.

Lithuanian priorities for Belarus

[12.](#) (C) Lithuania's Belarus point man Renatas Juska gave us a run-down of Lithuania's policy objectives in its most troublesome neighbor, following the GOL's hosting of the Friends of Belarus meeting in Vilnius on September 30. As the country with the closest EU capital to Minsk, Lithuania sees itself as a natural leader of Belarus policy in the European Union as well as an effective advocate of Western and European influence to the Belarusian people. As a trade partner and major client of Lithuania's port of Klaipeda, the GOL considers Belarus more important to Lithuania economically than it is to any other EU member-state. Lithuania has tried to encourage a more active EU approach to Belarus that promotes democratic forces, but stops short of sanctions that could trigger retaliatory economic measures against Lithuania.

[13.](#) (C) In a September 20 non-paper to EU capitals, Lithuania complained about the EU's "limited scope in the Eastern neighborhood," saying that "the U.S., 'new' Members of the EU, and Russia are much more active" than the EU in Belarus. The Finnish Presidency is "not really paying attention to Belarus," said Renatas Juska, an MFA official who is in charge of Lithuania's support for democratic forces in Belarus. (A Finnish Embassy representative commented to us separately that the Lithuanians believe that the Finnish Presidency is not aggressive enough in support for the Belarusian opposition, but added that the Presidency must represent the EU consensus. He also added that while

Lithuania complains about lack of EU support for Belarus' opposition, it was willing to hold up consensus on withdrawing GSP privileges for "its own commercial interests" (see below)). Juska complained that lack of expertise about Belarus can lead the EU to pursue a crude policy of non-attention and failed democracy programs, followed by sanctions that do more harm than good.

Lithuania: Schengen Visa fee will isolate Belarus

14. (C) For several months Lithuania has sought an exception to the imminent 60-euro visa fee that will follow Lithuania's entry in to the Schengen zone, now expected in 2008 (ref D). According to Juska, more Belarusians visit Lithuania than any other EU member state, and for those with limited resources Vilnius is probably the only EU capital they can afford to visit. Lithuanian officials fear that that an increase in visa fees will effectively shut Lithuania's border to most Belarusians. The harmonized Schengen fee of 60 euros is prohibitively expensive, they say, to Belarusians wanting to take the four-hour train to Vilnius to go shopping, attend courses at the European Humanities University (EHU), or participate in international conferences. The GOL worries that "people-to-people contact" between Belarusians and other Europeans will fall dramatically, hurting efforts to foster democracy. Since Lithuania reduced its visa fee from 20 to five euros, travel of Belarusians to Lithuania more than doubled, according to Belarus desk officer Marius Gudynas.

Revisiting the no-cabinet level engagement rule?

15. (C) Juska also mentioned the possibility of re-visiting the rule banning ministerial meetings. Juska reported that Ambassadors from the UK and Germany raised the issue in the

VILNIUS 00000946 002.2 OF 002

Friends of Belarus meetings, and that their points largely tracked with Lithuanian views that countries -- especially those nearby Belarus -- could decide to meet with Ministers from Belarus on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration the business to be done and the track record of that particular minister. Lithuania has in the past made the case that engagement with cabinet level officials can also be a useful influence on the Lukashenko regime, and could perhaps encourage change within the regime (ref C). (The previous government occasionally flouted the ban on ministerial meetings (ref x -- 05 Vilnius 1076)). Lithuania continues sub-cabinet level engagement of Belarus, and has raised the level of engagement to seek action on particular topics, as for example during last June's talks at the Air Force Commander level about airspace violations (refs A and B).

Lithuania opposes generalized sanctions

16. (C) Lithuania, with Poland and Latvia, recently formed a blocking minority to resist sanctions in Brussels that would have withdrawn GSP preferences from Belarus. (Note: the decision was taken by the 133 Committee despite Lithuania's efforts to move discussion to the Political and Security Committee.) According to Juska, Lithuania took its cue from opposition leaders who think that Belarus lacks the media resources necessary to adequately convey the message to the public that the sanctions were aimed at actions of the Lukashenko regime. Juska told us, citing opposition leaders (with whom he has regular contact), that generalized sanctions will only strengthen the isolationist regime. He said that Lithuania has sought to include more names on the EU's travel ban list, but has failed to reach consensus on the expanded list of names with its European counterparts.

Assistance to opposition groups

17. (C) Juska added that Lithuania views EU assistance to Belarus as wasteful and ineffective, claiming that the Commission grants amounts in sums that are too large and mismanages projects from Brussels. Lithuania is pushing for the Commission partially to finance Lithuania's proposed European Fund for Democracy, which would in turn flexibly direct support to civil society and democratic forces in Belarus and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Lithuania's own assistance programs have focused on small grants to "trustworthy" political youth groups and activist organizations to run information campaigns. Lithuania has also printed pro-democracy flyers and bulletins for distribution in Belarus, although he admitted it has been hard to measure the success of their distribution. Juska added that the Belarusian KGB has infiltrated the better-known activist groups, and that foreign donors too often give money to contacts that undermine democratic efforts through subterfuge.

Comment

18. (C) It's probably no coincidence that the policies that Juska justifies in terms of democracy -- an exception for visa fees, no generalized sanctions, higher-level engagement -- also please those interests in Lithuania who seek to protect the economic relationship with Belarus. We leave it to Embassy Minsk to weigh the consequences of revisiting the EU's restricted engagement rule or opposing generalized sanctions, but we should expect that Lithuania will continue its dualistic relationship with Belarus, supporting democratic forces while pursuing good working relations to protect Lithuania's important trade and border security relationship.
CLOUD